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ABSTRACT

Growing up black in America is a difficult process. Racism and discrimination are as much a part of America's heritage as democracy and equality. For more than three centuries, American society and its institutions have segregated and excluded minority groups, especially blacks, on the basis of racial features. In 1947, Clark and Clark tested the effect of racial identification on self-concept by interviewing 253 black nursery and primary school children in the segregated south and the integrated north. As part of the study, children were asked to choose either a white or a black doll. Most of the children, even as early as 3 years old, preferred the white doll. Numerous subsequent studies conducted with more refinements and greater controls found the same positive attitude toward light skinned dolls. However, these studies tell us very little about how black children feel about themselves in various situations. Only when the research begins to examine the total environment of black children can we begin to understand how they adapt to living in a racist society. (Author/WI)

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
RACIAL PREFERENCES IN BLACK CHILDREN AND THEIR SELF CONCEPT

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Growing up Black in America is a difficult process. Black children encounter many problems that other children do not. They are constantly exposed to an environment which can be and often is hostile, cruel, and degrading. How do Black children learn to cope with this environment? This is a question which has plagued social scientists for the past two decades. Some would argue that Black children never do learn to cope which results in a negative view of themselves, low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and academic failure. Most often, Black families and communities are seen as the transmitters of the attitudes which foster and support negative feelings toward self. We would argue that the majority of Black children do not have negative self-concepts because their families and communities provide them with an environment which supports and accepts their "blackness". We would further suggest that one can not postulate that there is a direct relationship between children's racial attitudes and their self-concept. It does not seem feasible to theorize that because Black children tend to prefer light-skinned figures and sometimes misidentify themselves that they view themselves negatively or have poor self-concepts. However, this is the most accepted view. In this paper, we intend to: 1. look at the historical

foundations of racism in the United States; 2. review significant research on racial preference and racial preference and racial identity in preschool children; and 3. analyze the research in a sociopolitical context.

Sociopolitical History of Racism in the United States

Racism and discrimination are as much a part of America's heritage as democracy and equality. At the very foundation of America's history is an inhumane attitude that existed toward people who were different. This attitude was first reflected in the treatment of the American Indians and later in the treatment of Afro-Americans. Early settlers came to America, took the land that belonged to the Indians and called them savages because they fought to keep their land.

In 1619, Blacks came to America as indentured servants with the intention of buying their freedom and taking their place as first class citizens. Some of these first Blacks were able to buy their freedom and ironically some of them were able to own slaves. However by 1660 slave laws were instituted which would perpetuate slavery from one generation to another. Consequently, slaves were no longer considered human beings; instead, they were property which could be bought and sold at their owners command. During this period, there were some free Blacks since they physically resembled slaves, they had to carry

a pass which stated that they were free men. A white man could claim without any evidence that a free Black man was a slave and automatically the man was returned to bondage. A large majority of free Blacks lived in daily fear of losing what freedom they had. One slip or ignorance of the law could send them back into the ranks of slavery. There were many restrictions placed on free Blacks.

Historians have disagreed on the basis of slavery: Was it based on economic need or racism? Winthrop Jorddon (1968) contended that there would have been no enslavement without economic need but no one can overlook the importance of racial differences as an indispensable key to the degradation of Blacks in America. He further argued that if racial characteristics had meant nothing to the English settlers, it is difficult to see how slavery based on race ever emerged, how the complexion as a mark of slavery ever entered the colonists' minds. Pinkney (1969) noted that regardless of whether the participatory factor was economic or racist, the attitudes which ultimately developed toward Blacks, and the behavioral component of attitudes, led to a system of bondage without parallel in human history. These attitudes were fostered and maintained in America for more than three hundred years. They were intertwined in every aspect of American culture.

Religious institutions sanctioned slavery and the and the inferiority of Blacks. In order to become free, a

slave had to become a Christian. Slaves were forced to attend churches that were segregated. They were forced to listen to ministers who preached that slavery was ordained by God and that in order to go to heaven one must be a good slave on earth. The symbolism in Judeo-Christian religion further supported the negative connotations that were attached to the term black. This was portrayed through the struggle of good and evil with good represented by white and evil represented by black.

The writings and early literature depicted Blacks as being inferior to Indians as well as to white Americans. Blacks were described by early authors as lazy, backward, and ignorant. Scientific writings also described the Black man as inferior. The theory of social Darwinism was used to express the notion that those who seemed superior were there because they were most fit and white Americans were superior. As late as the 1960 's the writings of Arthur Jensen and William Shockley supported the idea that Blacks were genetically inferior. However, laws were the most instrumental force in promoting and maintaining institutionalized racism in this society. From the beginning, laws were created to enforce slavery and the inferiority of Blacks. Following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Black codes and Jim Crow laws were formed which further perpetuated the segregation and inferiority of Blacks in the south and preserved the impression of white supremacy. In 1896 in the case of

Plessy v. Ferguson, the United States courts upheld the legality of the segregation of Blacks. The decision permitted racially segregated facilities as long as they were equal.

For more than three centuries American society and its institutions--churches, schools, and other public organizations have segregated and excluded minority groups, especially Blacks on the basis of racial features. In spite of the racism and discrimination that was prevalent in every aspect of American life, there were some Americans who were concerned about its effect on the personality development of individuals, primarily children. Kenneth Clark, a prominent psychologist prepared a report titled "Effect of Prejudice and Discrimination on Personality Development" for the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth. The report emphasized the damaging effects of racial prejudice and segregation on children. Four years later, May 1954 the United States Supreme Court citing the work of Clark ruled that racial segregation in public education deprived children of minority groups of equal educational opportunity and therefore violated the "equal protection" clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. The United States Supreme Court stated :

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of minority groups of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. To separate them from those of

similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may effect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. We conclude in the field of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Because of Clark's research and the Supreme Court's decision, segregation of Blacks was no longer legal in the United States. Social science research had greatly influenced the decision of the courts therefore social scientists became more concerned about the development of racial attitudes and preferences in children. The focal point of this research was the development of racial attitudes in black children's self-concept and socialization in this society.

Social Science Research on Young Children's Racial Attitudes

Racial attitudes appear to be learned by encounters with the environment. This is a continuous process throughout childhood. Clark (1955) argued that children cannot learn what racial group they belong to without being involved in a larger pattern of emotions, conflicts, and desires which are a part of their growing knowledge of what society thinks about their race. By the age of two or two and a half, children begin to show evidence of consciousness of their own or other racial characteristics. Goodman (1964) and Harding, Proshansky, Kutner, and Chein (1969) proposed three overlapping stages in majority and minority group's children. The stage of awareness which develops by age three is

characterized by a beginning and sharpening of consciousness of self and others in terms of racial identity. The second stage, ages four through eight, is the orientation or the development of an incipient attitude. It is learning and synthesizing of race related words, concepts, and values. The third stage is the development of a true attitude of the establishment of full-fledged racial attitudes. Allport (1954) emphasized the importance of the home environment in the development of racial attitudes. He suggested that children adopt prejudice which means that they take over the attitudes and stereotypes of their family and cultural environment or they develop prejudice. In this case, their training does not transfer racial attitudes directly to them, but rather creates an atmosphere in which children develop prejudice as a style of life. Parents may or may not express their own prejudices. What is crucial in this situation is that the parent's modes of handling their children's discipline and loving is such that children cannot help to acquire fears, suspicions, and hatreds that sooner or later may be fixed on a minority group.

Numerous researchers have examined the development of racial attitudes in young children and the effects of racial identification on self-concept. In 1947, Clark and Clark asked 253 Black nursery and primary children in **the** segregated south and the integrated north to respond to a number of questions by choosing one of two dolls. One

of the dolls was fair skinned or white and the other doll was dark skinned or Black. The questions that the Clarks asked were: Which is the good doll? Which doll would you like to play with? Which is the white doll? Which is the colored doll? Which doll looks like you? Results from this study indicated that 77 per cent of the children were able to distinguish between white and black dolls by age three and that figure rose consistently year by year until it reached 100 per cent at age seven. At age three 36 per cent of the children were able to choose the doll that looked like them. By the age of seven, 86 per cent of the children were able to make correct identifications but failed to identify themselves correctly. Most of the children even as early as three preferred the white doll to play with and rejected the Black doll.

In examining the research of Clark and Clark we must consider the historical period of the research as well as the methodology used. Historically, it was an era following World War II; an era when many Blacks had experienced more freedom abroad than at home; and an era when Blacks were adamant about changing their situation in America. In addition, organizations and institutions such as the NAACP, National Urban League, CORE, and Black colleges were attempting to devise plans which would change the role of Blacks in America. The Clarks, two Black psychologists, were also concerned about segregation and the effects of segregation on Blacks, primarily

children. It was apparent that segregation was harmful but it was necessary to provide data to support this knowledge. The Clarks' research served a purpose--it made Americans more aware of the evils of segregation by presenting them with empirical evidence and it laid the foundation for the court decision which ruled that segregation of educational facilities was unconstitutional. Unfortunately, it also provided social scientists with an inadequate research tool for examining the relationship between racial attitudes and self concept in Black children.

Greenwald and Oppenheim (1968) used a method similar to Clark to determine the magnitude of self-misidentification among black children. They interviewed four and five year olds in integrated and nonintegrated nursery schools in New York. The data showed that only thirteen per cent of the Black children in the study misidentified themselves as compared to thirty-six per cent in the Clarks' study. The results of this study suggested that Black children's misidentification in previous studies might have resulted from having to choose between a black doll and a white doll. In this study, the children were given three choices- a white doll, a mulatto doll, and a Black doll which provided light skinned Black children with an appropriate color to match themselves with. Asher and Allen (1969) partially replicated and extended the Clarks' work. The

subjects were Black children and white children from Newark, New Jersey who ranged in age from three to eight. The study revealed that the large majority of children preferred the white puppet and rejected the brown one. Likewise, Hrabra and Grant (1970) investigated the racial preferences of Black children in Lincoln, Nebraska. The investigators found that the majority of Black children preferred the Black doll and this preference increased with age. They concluded that the results implied that Black children were not white oriented and that they were developing racial pride.

Morland and Williams (1976) criticized the research method used by Clark because they believed that children needed more questions to respond to. As a result of this belief, they developed instruments which gave children more chances to respond to the same questions thus measuring children's positive or negative tendencies toward a certain race. Morland's instrument, the Morland Picture Interview, attempted to measure the degree of racial acceptance and preference in preschool children. Studies were conducted throughout the United States which revealed that on the average about six out of ten of the Black preschool subjects expressed a preference for light skinned figures, while about three out of ten expressed a preference for dark skinned figures. The Preschool Racial Attitude Measure (PRAM), constructed by Williams, measured racial attitudes by assessing children's tendencies to choose light skinned or

dark skinned figures in response to stories containing negative or positive evaluative adjectives. PRAM was used in studies in Mississippi, Washington, D.C., and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In most of those studies Black children displayed a bias toward light skinned figures. Morland and Williams concluded that from age three onwards preschool children show a positive attitude toward and a preference for light skinned persons as opposed to dark skinned persons. They found that the positive attitude preference for light skinned persons was evident in both white and Black children but it was less pronounced in the latter.

In all of these studies, the researchers used a force-choice procedure therefore the subjects were forced to choose a stimulus (doll, puppet, picture) which was representative of either Black people or white people. Even when researchers attempted to modify the research method, the procedure still did not consider what the responses meant. It was difficult to determine what the children were responding to and what motivational factors influenced those responses. Can we assume that because Black children might choose a white doll that would also choose a white friend to play with? Does this mean that Black children generally prefer white playmates? Is it possible that Black children choose white puppets, dolls, and photographs

because they are more familiar? How often are Black children exposed to Black dolls and puppets? Can we further assume that because Black children tend to respond in the manner that society expects them to by choosing white dolls over Black ones that they view themselves as inferior? On the basis of the data that most social scientists have introduced, it is not possible to answer any of these questions.

Research like this does not look at Black children as individuals who live in an environment which is influenced by many factors, in addition to the obvious ones. It is obvious that Black children live in an environment that is racist, oppressive, and discriminatory; however, it is not so obvious how Black children to adapt and live in that environment. Black children did not learn to live and survive in this society by hating themselves or by believing that white people are superior. We cannot determine how Black children feel about themselves by looking at them in an unnatural situation. The research should be designed so that the examiner can find out how Black children feel about themselves in various situations. Children should be observed in natural settings-home, community, and school. Based on observations and interactions with children in their natural settings, can we say that racial attitudes and preferences explains the self concept of Black children?

It is our belief that force-choice research encourages and promotes racist tendencies in young children. It forces children to focus their attention on racial differences and characteristics in people. Children are forced to choose someone who is good or bad based on the skin color of that person. It is possible that it did not occur to the child that some people could be labelled as good or bad based on skin color until they experienced this force-choice situation.

Analysis of Research in a Sociopolitical Context

On the basis of the research findings we can conclude that children develop an early awareness of racial differences, usually between the ages of two and a half and three. Most children tend to have a preference for fair skinned people; however, this tendency appears to be less evident in Black children. There is also some evidence that Black children often misidentify themselves when they are asked to choose the stimuli (dolls, puppets, photographs) which looks most like them. It has been argued that Black children have difficulty identifying themselves because they do not like themselves; they do not like being Black; and they feel inferior because they are Black. The major question that we must consider is: "What does this mean?" "What does this say about Black children's self concept?" It is our belief that these studies say very little. To understand Black children we must begin to look at them in

their immediate environment, as well as in the larger society which is greatly permeated with prejudice, discrimination, and racial segregation. We cannot continue to assume that Black children's total personality and self concept is determined by interactions with white Americans. To further explain our belief we will discuss family and community influences on the development of racial attitudes and self concept in Black children.

‡ Most Black children live in communities which have attempted to counteract the effects of racism. Contrary to public belief, historical accounts of Blacks in America show that Black people have a history of teaching pride and self respect to their children. They never accepted their servitude nor the view that whites had of them. This was demonstrated through insurrections, murders of their masters, protests movements throughout history, and the development of a distinctive Black culture. Black people were never the carefree, contented individuals that society would like us to believe they were. Fouissant (1977) suggested that the "Sambo" image of docility was a survival mechanism. Underneath it existed the Black person's own definition of themselves-their church, their music, their literature, and their whole life style-which has reflected a love of self. Considering the grim circumstance from which it emerged, it is difficult for whites to understand it. Blacks have struggled

hard to show their children that the white view of them as inferior is incorrect as well as immoral. Another factor which helped Blacks sustain a positive self concept was their faith in the future- a belief that better times were coming.

Washington (1977) further proposed that through humane development, the total functioning of an individual in a complex world where emotional realities are keyed to not only survival but to normal growth and development, Black people were able to develop a moral-emotional position which aids in the transcendence of oppressions and permits the individual to fashion an emotional world in which to live (p. 13). He also indicates that the key element for this humanness among Black people is love. Parents give love to their children unconditionally, it is part of the acceptance and inclusiveness which characterizes the Black family and community. Likewise, the Black family teaches their children a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, a sense of pride, and a sense of willingness to work. Black parents do provide their children with the love, protection, and emotional support that they need in order to feel good about themselves. In addition, Black parents have attempted to provide their children with some knowledge of the larger society and how to cope with being a member of a minority group.

Black children also learn how to play a variety of different roles depending on the situation and the

environment.

Many children growing up in the Black community learn a certain kind of mental toughness. They learn survival skills. They know how to jive the school principal, and they show a lot of psychological cleverness and originality in the particular style they emerge with. They learn how to deal with the credit man, the teacher in the school.....But most institutions have not learned to appreciate and capitalize upon this particular style (White, 1970).

It is apparent that the Black family and community does provide an environment that would foster the development of a positive view of self. In the future, research on Black children must consider this environment--the home and community environment which helps the Black child form his or her values and beliefs. We need to find out how Black children view themselves in different situations, home, community, and school. Only when we begin research which looks at the total environment of the Black child can we begin to better understand him or her. We need to know how Black children feel about themselves and how they have managed to adapt to living in a society which is racist.

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